

Work Smarter and Not Harder

Interview with Peter Taylor ^{1,2}

Author, Speaker and Trainer

Author of *The Lazy Project Manager* and other books



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Introduction to the interviewee

Peter Taylor, Speaker, Author and Trainer, is most famous as the author of the book *The Lazy Project Manager*, an Amazon bestseller in the field of project management. His other books include *The Thirty-Six Stratagems*, *Leading Successful PMOs*, *The Presentation on Presentations*, *The Project Manager Who Smiled*, etc.

As a speaker, he is described as “perhaps the most entertaining and inspiring speaker in the project management world today”. He has made presentations to tens of thousands in nearly 30 countries.

He is also an experienced senior Program / PMO and transformation specialist with the ability to define overarching priorities and ensure project and program activity satisfies high level business objectives. His key strengths include: embedding robust governance to ensure successful delivery

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of £multi-million change programs and working with stakeholders throughout the project lifecycle to ensure delivery of tangible business benefits; introducing best practice processes aligned with an organisation’s culture and maturity. Working across multiple industries including Manufacturing, Health, Pharmaceuticals, FMCG, Aerospace and Finance.

Peter Taylor is based in the United Kingdom, but has readers, followers and fans worldwide. Learn more about Peter at <http://thelazyprojectmanager.com/peter-taylor>

Interview

Part I : “We can all learn from Chinese PM wisdom”

Q1. It seems that you have a sound understanding of Chinese PM wisdom since you have published books titled “The Thirty-Six Stratagems”. What do you think we can learn from Chinese PM wisdom? How can Chinese PM wisdom help project management practice?

Peter Taylor (Taylor): I really wouldn’t say that I have a sound understanding of Chinese wisdom but I was set a challenge by one of my publishers to write a modern day version of “The Thirty-Six Stratagems” and I loved the opportunity to read the original book, consider the messages and seek modern examples of the stratagems.

I definitely believe that we can all learn from Chinese PM wisdom, and Chinese wisdom in general. There is a calmness to such wisdom: deep consideration of contemplation and thought before action and this is what many project managers around the world keep forgetting. They are so busy with being busy that they don’t act in a good way by keeping in mind the long-term goals and objectives of the projects and rising above the day-to-day activities to assess the project’s health and progress. I’m not suggesting that you delay action but only that such action is considered, and options evaluated before moving on.

Q2. Have you been to China? What’s your impression on project management practice in China?

Taylor: Sadly no, I have never been to China, but I would love to have that opportunity. To see the country, meet the people, and speak at Chinese PM events and even deliver some training there would be amazing and a great experience for life.

I can’t really say too much about my impression of project management practice in China beyond reflecting that some of the most amazing engineering achievements have happened in China in the last 20 years and therefore project management must be well advanced in China.

Part II : “Work smarter and not harder”

Q3. Would you please offer some tips for project managers to work smarter?

Taylor: This is the essence of my book *The Lazy Project Manager*, what I refer to as ‘productive laziness’ or working smarter and not harder. The book lists many points of effective working from the start of the project through to the end of the project, and all the hard work in the middle. Top tips for success in the ‘lazy’ way:

- 1) It is important for you to stay ahead of the game, start confidently, dress appropriately, get the upper hand and anticipate – keep your eye on the end game.
- 2) Manage your sponsor, understand them and what they want from you and the project – make sure you know what’s in it for them.
- 3) And manage the project creep, which is inevitable but manageable with a good and proven change process linked to an appreciative use of the ‘parking lot’.
- 4) Avoid a communication breakdown through an open, honest, effective communication process that suits each individual.
- 5) Have fun, which will help the project but be careful in your use of ‘fun’ – encourage a good level of humor amongst the project team.
- 6) Breathe normally and stay calm, plan for project challenges and when they do happen make sure you filter problems, delegate what you can and prioritize what is left over in order to keep the project on track.
- 7) Make your project attractive, get the best team and keep them feeling ‘loved’ – know what ‘love’ individuals want.
- 8) Avoid swamping yourself with communication and demands for your time, and by all means have an open door, but be a good manager and close it some of the time for the greater good of the project.
- 9) Always be open to learning more, from the project knowledge and history, by talking openly to project team members so that you can learn the lessons that are there to be learned and share everything by telling others what you now know.

Projects are difficult. I am not suggesting that they aren’t, but there is a better way to approach these vehicles of change. I believe that is to be productively ‘lazy’.

Q4. Your book *The Lazy Project Manager* has been an Amazon bestseller. In your opinion, what are the reasons for its popularity among readers?

Taylor: Yes, it has been an incredible success and is still in the project management book charts around the world 10 years after its first publication, for which I am very grateful. It has given me the chance to travel a lot of the world and meet/speak to many, many people: 350 presentations, 25 countries, over 80,000 people to date.

Why has this been a massive worldwide success in the world of project management? I believe that the book is a ground-breaking work incorporating humour, brevity and honesty, aided by

references to Italian Economists, Monty Python, Field Marshalls in the Prussian army and Dinosaurs (of course). So, it's a project management book very unlike anything that came before it, or since in reality. People genuinely seem to love it and the word has spread and keeps spreading.

Part 3: “Balanced PMO is the most effective”

Q5. You have successfully established PMOs for world-famous companies using a self-designed 'balanced PMO' methodology. Would you please briefly introduce the methodology?

Taylor: As with most things in life (and business), getting a balance right can prove to be far more effective, especially in the long run, than having a single focus that ignores other key elements. The same is true of the PMO. A balanced approach will definitely pay dividends and will not only ensure that the PMO is as effective and efficient as possible but will also aid the acceptance of the PMO by the rest of the organization.

For example, if your PMO is created solely for the purpose of being the 'project police', then you will be in for a very short run. There's no doubt that the role of policing projects is one part of the PMO's responsibility but not the only part; such an approach may work for a short period of time, but it is not sustainable.

And if your PMO is focused on firefighting, then again it will work for a while but not beyond that as it is demoralizing to only work on problem projects and deal with escalating issues. Far better is to prevent the fires from even starting. Be the right sort of firefighter.

One way to achieve such a balance in the PMO is to consider structuring your efforts under what I call the '5Ps': People, Process, Promotion, Performance, Project Management Information System.

It may be tempting to just think of the PMO as all about the process, the means to ensure that good project management is achieved through methodology and quality assurance etc. but that ignores the people side.

And it may be that your consideration is towards the project management community and your focus is drawn towards the people (projects are all about people after all) and so you direct your efforts as a PMO leader towards training and team building etc. but this ignores the project mechanics.

You may also accept the need to build a good tracking and reporting system, supported by an investment in a project management information system, to deliver the visibility of project health and progress towards business goals.

But without the inclusion of a promotional program, it could well be the case that all of the good work you and your team achieve in the areas of process and people will go unnoticed and

unappreciated by both your peers and the executive.

The best PMOs balance all of these to achieve the most effective development of capability, representation of capability and sharing of capability and achievement.

Q6. According to your observation, what are the top qualities of a PMO leader in this VUCA era?

Taylor: Uniqueness. “Out of the box” really works for a PMO. Every PMO is and should be different. And every PMO leader should be thinking this way. Besides, every PMO needs to be ready to change as it evolves and moves with the strategic intention of the organization it supports. In the VUCA world, this is even more true.

In my book “Leading Successful PMOs”, it was noted from some research that the key skills/focus of a PMO leader should be:

- Be passionate about projects and project management,
- Be strong in your communication,
- Negotiate well for your PMO,
- Be enthusiastic in leading change, and
- Don’t be afraid to be unique: anything else is probably wrong for you and your business.

Q7. Talking about communication, what are the key factors of good communication?

Taylor: Bad communication is absolutely the number one killer of a project.

To be successful, communication has to tick all four boxes: right information, delivered at the right time, in the right way, and to the right person.

Get any of those wrong and communication will fail, and mistakes will be made and expectations mis-set and from this point the project issues will escalate.

A good project manager spends perhaps even 90% of their time communicating in some way. It is where the great project managers differentiate themselves from the not so great project managers.

Part 4: “First entertain and then educate”

Q8. You are described as “perhaps the most entertaining and inspiring speaker in the project management world today”. Do you like this assessment? What’s your comment on it?

Taylor: It was a very nice comment, one of many that I have been very happy to receive over the last 10 years (not that everybody loves what I do of course, but most do which is good enough for me).

I was taught something in my early days of speaking and that was “first entertain and then educate”, which I have found to be an excellent advice. In my presentations you will experience perhaps 80% entertainment and engagement with my audience and 20% key learning. This way the audience enjoys themselves and meanwhile they learn from the experience. If they enjoy it, then they can always find out more afterwards.

“The Lazy Project Manager” remains an extremely popular presentation topic but I have also developed a really fun experience in the topic “The Presentation on Presentations”: we aren’t born to be professional level presenters but through this entertaining presentation the ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ of good presentations are explored along with a ‘how to prepare’ for that all important event. With a few simple lessons taught through the very medium of ‘presentation’, the audience will take away some great ideas for improving their own technique and ‘death by PowerPoint’ is definitely not the outcome.

I also deliver (perhaps the only one in the world) a stand-up comedy experience based on project management humour from my book “The Project Manager Who Smiled”. This is fun and amazingly popular for conference or event evening entertainment.

So being described as “perhaps the most entertaining and inspiring speaker in the project management world today” feels pretty good to me.

Part 5: “The days of the ‘Non-accidental Project Manager’ arrives”

Q9. You’ve been working in the field of project management for many years. What are the attractions of this field in your eyes?

Taylor: Excitement. Absolutely not 9-5 routine. Perhaps I can best answer that in referencing a ‘legacy’ article I contributed to some time ago, where project managers from around the world were asked to consider what they would leave behind as their legacy for the project community.

“After nearly 30 years in project management, it is only natural, from time to time, to consider what legacy my fellow project managers and I will leave behind for the next generation of project managers. After all, it has been the major part of my working life and a period of intense development of the ‘profession’.

Perhaps personally I can consider that my writings, including “The Lazy Project Manager”, can be one form of legacy, but in general how have the ‘Accidental Project Managers’ done?

I would argue ‘not bad’ should come back on the report; the growth in awareness of ‘project’ and the maturing of all of the professional communities, along with the focus on project skills and methods in most organizations is a pretty good place to be today. Plus, there is a vibrant wealth of knowledge out there (books, websites, blogs, podcasts, communities of practice, magazines such as ‘Project’ and so on) that project managers today can tap in to.

Yes, of course, 100% of projects are still not successful (and probably never will be) but project health is so much better these days in general and much of this is to do with the investment in project managers (training, support, certification etc.) – the days of the ‘Non-accidental Project Manager’ are definitely with us.

And there is much left to be done naturally: raising the standard of executive sponsorship, connecting business strategy to project-based activity, making project management a default step on the path to the top, the ‘C level’ of an organization etc.

But all in all, I think we should be proud of our achievements and be confident that the generation of ‘Intentional Project Managers’ entering the project management world today have a great legacy to build from, mainly because it is an amazingly exciting world to work in, one that delivers tremendous value to the business world and to the people those businesses impact.”

Q10. You’ve said project management is a valuable skill to pretty much everybody. Would you please explain it?

Taylor: I think it is a skill that is about personal organization and discipline and control, with passion behind that, and that is a skill everyone can benefit from in their personal lives.

In the business place, as we see more and more organizational work being project- based, those who understand projects and project management can gain an advantage over those who do not.

In my view, there are three components of organizational activity these days: business as usual (of course), projects as projects (pure and simple/complex and needing a dedicated project manager), but also what I refer to as “projects as usual” (change, managed as part of the daily work of business people who may or may not have ‘project manager’ in their title or even resume).

So, with that increasingly being true, I honestly believe that project management is a valuable skill to everybody.

Q11. In your view, what kind of project managers are popular in the workplace?

Taylor: The ones who care about people, about their teams, about their stakeholders. And those who care about the outcomes of their projects.

To read the original PMR interview with Chinese introduction, or to learn more about PMR magazine, visit <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>

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